

## UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF NIAS LANGUAGE

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**Abstract:** Spoken mostly in Nias Island located in the west part of Indonesia, Nias or Li Niha is a language which needs linguistic elaboration. It has characteristics that make it a unique language among those spoken in Indonesia, and to some extent, also has a few unusual features compared to the world languages. Its uniqueness is not limited to having only open syllables but also seen in other phonological issues, its orthography, morphology and syntax. This is an analytical-qualitative research done carefully by the writer as a native speaker of the language. In writing system, Nias uses umlaut over the letter o, circumflex over the letter w, and apostrophe between certain syllables. Phonologically, it has voiced bilabial trill, voiced bilabial fricative, voiced alveolar plosive trill, voiceless velar fricative and voiced dental fricative sounds. Morphologically, it is unique in its mutation system of nouns and peculiar type of ergativity. Syntactically, the language is also distinct in its structures of word order, predicates, and reflexivity.

**Key Words:** Nias, orthography, phonology, morphology, syntax

### 1. Introduction

Called *Li Niha* (literally ‘the language of people’ or ‘human language’) by its speakers, Nias is native to just around 700.000 people (Brown, 2001: xi) who mostly live in an island regionally located in North Sumatera and is spoken by those who have moved to other cities in Indonesia such as Medan and Pekanbaru. It is just one of around seven hundred local languages spoken in Indonesia. Among many reasons, the spread of Indonesian or *Bahasa* as the national language of Indonesia and English as an international language have contributed to negative attitude of young speakers to eventually avoid using this language. As this attitude is not supportive toward the language (Brown, 2001: 7; Duha, 2010: 171), it becomes a potential factor that puts the language in the danger of extinction.

Such consideration has underlain the emergence of this article both with the intention to reveal Nias unique characteristics to the native speakers and to pose the features to those interested in linguistics. Some of the characteristics discussed here cover the ones that are comparable to those of world languages while others are just features that draw general distinctions between Nias and languages spoken in Indonesia. Thus, a few characteristics might seem commonly found in world languages but such features have been considered here as they are rarely found in Indonesian local languages or at least those spoken around Nias Island.

This paper is a result of observations processed by descriptive-analytical qualitative method that makes use of available facts or information to analyze and to make a critical evaluation (Kothari, 2004: 110; Stake, 2010: 19, 20). The research was done by studying linguistic elaborations on Nias with the purpose of finding its peculiar characteristics. In addition, an internal research on the language itself was also conducted in order to find other valuable characteristics. The result found covers linguistic fields such as orthography, phonology, morphology, and syntax of the language.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1 Orthographic Characteristics

First characteristic of Nias is the use of letter *o* with an umlaut or diaeresis. This diacritic indicates that the vowel is pronounced differently from the common *o*. In both Nias and Indonesian, sounds /e/ and /ɜ/ do exist. In Indonesian, however, these sounds are represented by the same letter *e*. In Nias, in contrary, they are represented by different letters. The first is represented by *e* as in Indonesian but the latter by *ö*. The words *femöna* (victory) and *ohitö* (ambition), for examples, are pronounced /femɜna/ and /ɔhitɜ/ respectively. Sometimes an alternative such as tilde is used over the letter *o* (Zebua, 1994) but the umlaut is mostly used in standard or formal texts.

The use of a circumflex over letter *w* is another orthographic characteristic of Nias. It is used to differentiate voiced bilabial fricative sound /β/ from voiced labial-velar approximant sound /w/ found in the language. Typically in Nias literature, plain *w* is used to represent these distinct sounds (Zalukhu, 1992; Duha, 2012) but unless the readers are good enough at the language, this leads to a problem because letter *w* found in the words is either pronounced as /w/ or /β/. They refer to different meanings. There have been efforts, however, to realize these different phonemes with different letters (Hämmerle, 1999; Brown, 2001: 15) but most acceptable solution so far is that proposed by Halawa as posted in *Nias Online* (2010). He proposes the use of *ŵ* (or *w* with circumflex) for the phoneme /β/ and the plain letter *w* for /w/ as the latter is the same in form and pronunciation as that found in Indonesian. Apolonius Lase applied this in writing *Kamus Li Niha* (2011); a Nias newest and well-known dictionary.

Last characteristic related to the writing system of this language is the use of apostrophe as a marker of intervocalic glottal stops. In addition to diphthongs like *au-* in *aukhu* (hot) or *-ia-* in *diala* (fishnet), there are two other possibilities of vowels occurring in a sequence but are treated as distinct syllables in Nias. A vowel functioning as a syllable may directly follow another syllable like *-u* in *obou* (rotten) and *-i* in *aŵai* (finish) or separated by an apostrophe like those in *aŵu'a* (move), *fabö'ö* (different), and *me'e* (cry). The syllables *-u* and *-i* in the examples are pronounced without any stop while *-a*, *-ö*, and *-e* are preceded by intervocalic glottal stops. The absence and presence of the apostrophe are really essential; as can be seen between *tu'a* (coconut

milk) and *tua* (grandfather), *u'a* (I eat) and *ua* (first, for a moment), or *i'a* (fish, *also* it/he eats) and *ia* (he/she/it). These three 'pairs', however, are all two-syllable words. In informal contexts, some take it for granted by using comma or dot between the vowels instead of apostrophe for this function, but this is grammatically unacceptable and surely leads to confusion.

## 2.2 Phonological Characteristics

First phonological characteristic of Li Niha is the presence of voiced dental fricative /ð/. Most Nias speakers do not pronounce the letter *d* as voiced alveolar plosive like those found in Bahasa or other Indonesian local languages such as Batakese, Minangese, Javanese, or Sundanese but like the pronunciation of *th* in *father* or *them*. This phoneme is found a lot in Nias words like *da'ö* (it, that), *dadao* (sit), *du'u* (grass), and *adölö* (straight). Due to dialectal differences, speakers of certain dialects pronounce these words with voiced alveolar plosives but speakers of Gunungsitoli dialect, the widely known dialect, and Nias people in general treat *d* as voiced dental fricative sound. This makes Nias phonetically differs from Indonesian and many other languages in Indonesia.

Second and third characteristics are the phonemes voiced bilabial and voiced alveolar plosive trills. Blust considers bilabial trills as speech sounds rarely found in languages except for a few accounts that have been reported from Austronesian family like Nias (2013: 672). In Nias, voiced bilabial trill /B/ is realized by the combination of letters *m* and *b*. The letter *m*, however, is not nasalized like that in Indonesian word *sumber* (source) or English word *humble*. This is in line with the explanation given by Ladefoged and Maddieson on the pronunciation of *mb* while discussing nasalized and non-nasalized consonants (1996: 133). Thus, *mb* in Nias word *muhombo* [mu-ho-mbo] (to fly) is different from those in Indonesian word *sum-ber* or *am-bil* (take) and English word *hum-ble* or *am-bi-tion* because *m* is not nasalized but is trilled together with the letter *b* that follows.

Voiced alveolar plosive trill in the language is represented by a group of letters namely *n*, *d*, and *r* pronounced like voiced alveolar plosive *d* followed by a trill. Among Nias words containing this phoneme are *faondra* (meet), *andrö* (ask), and *undre* (turmeric). According to Brown, it is also used as a morphological variant of /d/ in both nouns and verbs as well as in the numeral system (2001: 17). Typically in languages, *n* in the two syllable words *andrö* and *undre*, for examples, is grouped with the preceding letter(s) as a syllable. In Nias, this letter merges with *d* and *r* that follow and as it does so, it loses its nasal sound so that the only sound dominating the syllable is that of alveolar plosive /d/ with a trill indicated by the letter *r*. The second syllables of the two, thus, are *-ndrö* and *-ndre*, leaving *a-* and *u-* alone as syllables consisting of one letter.

Voiceless velar fricative sound /x/ is the fourth characteristic found in Nias. It is often represented by letters *ch* in old literature (Harefa, 1970; La'ija, 1971) but is typically and formally substituted by *kh* in recent ones (Nazara, 2006; Hämmerle, 2012). This sound is

pronounced like  $\chi$  in Greek word ευχαριστώ (thank you). It is like ‘nearly the same’ sound *kh* in the Indonesian word *akhir* (an end) or *khusus* (special). Despite the fact that the combination of these letters tends to be pronounced /k/ or /h/ alone in Indonesian, Nias is full of its velar-fricative sound. This makes the language sounds unique when spoken.

Fifth characteristic is the presence of voiced bilabial fricative /β/. See the second paragraph of (2.1) above for its orthographic information. Brown in her analysis of south dialect of the language calls this phoneme voiced labio-dental approximant (2001: 15) and thus should be symbolized by /v/ in reference to the International Phonetic Alphabet (Odden, 2005: 39; Ogden, 2009: xiv). As most speakers of the other dialects pronounce this as fricative, the first term is used here. Thus, the letter *w* in *sara wawa* (one month) is pronounced /β/ while *w* is pronounced /w/ like that in the English word *win*. Voiced bilabial fricative sound is rarely found in world languages.

The last phonological characteristic considered here as unique is contributed by the fact that Nias is a language with open syllables. Most languages allow consonants to close the syllables of the words. In contrary, words ending with consonant sounds are not found in Li Niha (Ndruru, 2007: 2). All of the syllables in the vocabulary items such as *inötö* (time), *balöduhi* (knee), *la'izu* (cucumber), and *awuyu* (young), for instances, end in vowels. This syllabic rule helps explain why *m* and *n* are treated in such a way as in voiced bilabial and voiced alveolar plosive trills explained above. The principle also holds when foreign words enter into Nias vocabulary items. The Indonesian word *komputer*, for instance, is borrowed from English *computer*. In Nias, this word became *kofutö* as a result of phonological adaptation.

### 2.3 Morphological Characteristics

Defined generally as morphophonemic changes in consonants of nouns, mutation is considered the most distinguishing feature of Li Niha. As Brown explains, Nias mutation occurs on the initial segments of most nominal constituents and plays a role similar to that of case in other languages (Brown, 2001: 39). In addition to changes on consonants, Nias mutation also allows changes on initial vowels.

The word *ahe* (foot), for example, will be mutated into word beginning with voiced velar sound *g-* when used with certain syntactic function. In the construction *Ahegu zafökhö* (It is my foot that hurts - in clarifying that it is not the hand that hurts), the noun *ahe* does not change. In the sentence *Afökhö gahegu* (my foot hurts - in the sense that my foot feels something), in contrary, the noun *ahe* changes into *gahe*. Other words such as *ifö* (tooth) changes into *nifö*, *talü* (stomach) into *dalu*, but *nukha* (cloth) does not change. All of these criteria depend on certain syntactical rules.

Related to this, Lea Brown in her research on the south dialect considers this language as morphologically ergative in the sense that most subjects and patients are marked the same way but the agents or actors are marked differently (2001: xi). Here is an example. The noun *wofo* is the subject of intransitive verb *moloi* (run, fly) in the sentence *Moloi wofo da'ö* (That bird flew away) but is the object of transitive verb *-söndra* in *No lasöndra wofo da'ö* (They have found that bird). This noun in both sentences is in mutated form of *fofo* which is the right form when used as the actor of a transitive verb like *-a* (eat) in *No i'a fofo mbua da'ö* (That fruit has been eaten by a bird or A bird has eaten that fruit). Further explanation can be seen when the last sentence is compared to a 'similar' construction like *No i'a wofo asu da'ö* (That dog has eaten a bird). Both constructions begin by *no* (already) followed by *i'a* (it/he/she eats). The next elements, however, are in different forms. The first employs the unmutated form *fofo* to indicate that it is the actor and the second uses the mutated form *wofo* because it is the object. Furthermore, *mbua* is in mutated form of *bua* as it is the object but *asu* is in unmutated form (not the mutated form *nasu*) because it is the actor.

## 2.4 Syntactic Characteristics

Most of Nias sentences are inverted. Structures of languages in the world are either subject-verb or verb-subject in common orders. Two of these positions are found in Nias but with various criteria. As a language emerged from Austronesian family, typical word order of verbal clauses in Nias is VOS with the variation VSO (Brown, 2001: xi, 306). Word orders like these cause most predicates to come first in sequences. Sentences like *So ndra'ugö* (You exist or You are present) with *so* (exist) as the verb of the subject *ndra'ugö* (you), and *Mörödo* (I sleep) with *Mörö-* as the verb of the subject *-do* are in verb-subject structures. In addition to this characteristic, Nias allows words from different classes other than verbs to be the predicates. Nouns, for example, can take the role as predicates. As explored in an article discussing a type of Nias pronouns (Gulö, 2014), unmutated personal pronouns even appear in front of sentences as predicates.

Another syntactic characteristic of Nias is related to the last example given above; the subject *-do* in *Mörödo* is attached to the verb *Mörö-* 'sleep'. Explanation for this is that in addition to free personal pronouns, Nias also has the bound ones; both as pronominal prefixes and pronominal suffixes. This makes it possible to have a Nias sentence consisting of only one word because the subject and object are attached to the verb. The sentences *They beat me*, for example, can be translated into just one word *Labözido* and *It eats you* (in referring to a wild animal) into *I'a'ö* in Nias. These constructions constitute the subject-verb or SVO order. In the first example, *La-* acts as the subject or actor, *-bözi-* as the verb, and *-do* as the object. In the second, *I-* is the subject or actor, *-a-* is the verb, and *-ö* is the object.

The last characteristic considered important to discuss here about Li Niha is the lack of reflexives. There are no special forms of personal pronouns for reflexives in this language

(Brown, 2001: 71; Arka and Nazara (2002: 272). Reflexivisation, thus, is realized by syntactic use of a common personal pronoun. As recently done research especially for a set of the language's personal pronouns shows (Gulö, 2014), there is a possibility of using the unmutated forms of the personal pronouns as reflexives in Nias. The unmutated form *ya'ia* in the phrase *urifö samini'ö ya'ia* (an animal that hides itself), for instance, refers to the noun phrase *urifö* and thus expresses the system of reflexivity in this language.

### 3. Conclusion

In those explanations above, it is obvious that Nias or Li Niha has some unique characteristics not only in relation to Bahasa or other Indonesian languages but also to languages in wider range. The language has a few unique, orthographic characteristics compared to languages in Indonesia. It has some sounds or phonemes that are not found in Bahasa, two of which are rarely found even in the languages of the world. It is also syntactically distinct in its word order, predicates, and reflexivity. Moreover, the language is unique in its mutation system of nouns and peculiar type of ergativity.

There is a possibility that the number of features discussed here increases if deeper research is conducted on this Austronesian language but the ones elaborated here represent striking characteristics of the language. These characteristics are not to be ignored. In many cases people often violate the use of the mutated and unmutated nouns, for instance, and thus result in producing grammatically incorrect sentences. Some ignore the right ways of writing or typing the characters. It is not uncommon to find social media users replacing *ö* with numeral 6, the letter *e*, or with plain *o* due to difficulty in typing the right character. Such instant solutions will definitely contribute bad effects to the language. Constructive and educative efforts are needed from both linguists and native speakers of the language to prevent it from being extinct.

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